

## MEN'S AND WOMEN'S LANGUAGE IN PERSONAL ADS

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Robin Lakoff believes that men and women are determined by society to speak differently. Personal ads provide data with which to prove or disprove her hypothesis. With the abundance of terms in the personal ads for physical descriptions, idioms, and personalities, the ads provide insight to men's and women's speech. Personal ads are written in a context where people advertise themselves in order to attract a mate. When advertising themselves, people choose their words with thought, and determine what to say in order to draw someone to them. This study focuses on 100 personal ads written by men seeking women, and 100 personal ads written by women seeking men. All personal ads were taken from one issue of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Analyzing personal ads renders social and linguistic differences and similarities between men's and women's language.

### Method of Analysis

After creating a database from the ads, the findings were divided into two sections. The first section of the study examines the terms used by men and women in relation to Robin Lakoff's book *Language and Women's Place* (1975). Four of Lakoff's relevant assumptions about the differences in the language of men and women were selected and compared to the database to determine if in this context, her assumptions were proved or disproved. In the second section, there was an attempt to provide an explanation for men's and women's language in personal ads, such as the use of euphemisms and idioms.

### Personal Ads in Relation to Lakoff's Theories

Lakoff assumes there are differences in men's and women's language, such as women use only 'empty' adjectives such as divine or lovely, and that women hedge more than men. Her assumptions are not based on data, merely her beliefs as a woman. However, Marjorie Harness Goodwin (as cited in McKay and Hornberger, eds., 1997) believes that stereotypes of women's speech are not accurate if they are studied in a variety of activities; people's speech and personalities change to fit each activity. An activity, as defined by Stephen Levinson (as cited in McKay and Hornberger, eds., 1997:244), is something that is "goal-defined," and has "constraints on participants and a setting." Personal ads conform with this description of an activity. The goal of personal ads is to attract a mate. The constraint is a limit of printed space, the mode of communication, and the context. Therefore, it is possible to determine whether there is gender-related speech in the activity of people advertising themselves in newspaper personal ads.

Lakoff believes that women use 'empty' adjectives, such as cute, charming, sweet, adorable, lovely and divine (Lakoff, 1975). Men use stronger adjectives, such as great and terrific. However, after analyzing the database, both men and women used cute. When describing their physical characteristics, men used cute once and women used cute three times. When looking for the opposite sex, men used the word cute once and women did not use it at all. In the database, no women used the word charming, but one man did when describing his personality. One woman used the word sweet to describe her personality, and two men used the word; one man used sweet to describe his personality, and one used it to describe a desirable woman. lovely was used by two men to describe women, and not one woman. And finally, adorable and divine were used by neither men nor women. These analyses also disprove Lakoff's assumptions that women borrow words from men, such as great and terrific, but men do not borrow words from women, which are

considered frivolous. However, delightful, which is considered empty by Lakoff, was used by one woman to describe herself. No men used the word.

Lakoff gives reasons for why men use 'women's language.' She believes they are either British or they work in an academic field. She says that academic men sometimes speak like women because society views them the same as women: they don't really work, and their work is considered "frivolous" (Lakoff, 1975:14).

Lakoff believes that women discriminate between color more than men. For example, when looking at a car that is a shade of bluish-green, a man may call it green, whereas a woman may call it teal. Lakoff believes women discriminate between colors such as beige, tan, lavender and aquamarine (Lakoff, 1975:8). In the database, colors were given for eyes and hair. Thirty-nine women and twenty-four men provided their hair color. Women gave six different colors and men gave only three. Women gave blonde, brown, auburn, red, reddish-brown, and blondish. Men gave only brown, blond, and dark brown. Six women discriminated between red colors and only one man discriminated between brown and dark brown.

Thirty-eight women and twenty-four men reported eye color. Women reported six colors, and men only four. Here, ten women discriminated between the dark colors, as in dark eyes, brown eyes, and dark brown eyes. Men simply gave blue, brown, hazel and green. This coincides with Lakoff's argument. Again, Lakoff believes that color discrimination is not relevant to the real world, therefore it is the responsibility of women (Lakoff, 1975).

Lakoff also believes that women use hedges more than men. According to Lakoff, when making a statement, women will say "kind of" and "sort of," as in, "He is sort of tall" (Lakoff, 1975:53). Men are more likely to be direct and say, "He is tall." After analyzing the database, men hedged eight times and women did not hedge at all. For example, men looked for women who were sort of cute and reasonably fit, whereas women looked for men who were cute and in great shape. Men described themselves as fairly attractive and reasonably good-looking, whereas women described themselves as beautiful and pretty. This new data strongly disproves Lakoff's assumption that men are more direct than women in speech.

Finally, Lakoff makes assumptions between the use of lady and gentleman. She believes that lady and gentleman are not equal in their meanings, that lady has a more frivolous connotation to it. One way of exemplifying this is with job titles. Lakoff says that cleaning lady is commonly heard, but with a professional job, people use woman, as in woman doctor. Lady doctor is demeaning. Also, people say saleslady, but garbage gentleman is never heard. Lakoff compares the meaning of The Ladies Garden Society to the Ladies Strike for Peace (Lakoff, 1975: 22-23). There is a reason why woman is used in the latter, as in Women's Strike for Peace, as it sounds less trivial.

After analyzing the data, it first seemed as though lady and gentleman were used in equal ways. However, the words that preceded these words prompted different connotations. For example, when a woman asked for a gentleman, preceding the word she used active, fine, or no descriptive words at all. But when a man asked for a lady, he used words like young lady, happy lady, slender lady, lovely lady or lovable lady. Lady implies a stereotypical image of women when preceded by a frivolous adjective. It doesn't have the meaning that gentleman does, because it has to be preceded by other descriptive words. This coincides with Lakoff's hypothesis.

These are only four of Lakoff's various assumptions about the differences in men's and women's language. Her other assumptions are based on tag questions, intonation, italics and jokes. They are irrelevant for analyzing personal ads. However, other explanations about gender-related speech from the database can be hypothesized. The analysis begins with weight.

### Social and Linguistic Analysis of Personal Ads

Sixteen women and only four men admitted to being above the ideal weight, and the language used to describe their weight was different (Table 1). More women used euphemisms to describe their weight than men. For example, of the sixteen women who were above the ideal weight, eleven of them used euphemisms. Some of the euphemisms used by women were Rubenesque, full-figured, and plus-size. Of the four men who were above the ideal weight, only one used a euphemism, which was heavy-set. After looking at the database, it is easy to observe that more men gave their weight in pounds than women. Men were more direct, while women found euphemisms to describe their weight. The euphemisms used by women emphasized their sexuality. For example, Rubenesque is a heavy, yet sexy woman. Voluptuous describes a heavy woman, but one with a womanly shape. Plus-size is a euphemism for a heavy woman and the clothing she wears. Similarly, men's clothing is called big and tall, a very direct statement. Only one woman wrote that she was big, but she immediately followed it with and beautiful. An explanation for these euphemisms may be that women who are above the ideal weight break the false notion of all women being thin and small. Women need to cover up the actual weight with pleasant words.

Euphemisms were also used with regard to race. One woman described herself as chocolate, another as brown sugar, and one man described himself as a dark horse. All of these euphemisms were used by African-Americans. In contrast, three women bluntly stated they were of European origin, as in Irish-looking, Italian, and European. Again, being African-American breaks the false notion that being white is the norm, and therefore necessitated a euphemism.

Hair color provided another interesting point, in addition to Lakoff's color discrimination theory. Thirty-nine women and twenty-four men gave their hair color (Table 2). One reason for this disparity is that women are stereotyped more with regard to their hair color, for example, "Blondes have more fun," and "Redheads are temperamental." There are no stereotypes for men in terms of hair color.

Finally, the personal ads were analyzed with regard to linguistic features, such as polysyllabic words, compound words and idioms (Table 3). Women used eighteen polysyllabic words, such as healthy, slender, and beautiful, and men only used eight. Men used words such as thin, trim, tall, and fit. Women used more idioms than men. Women used ten idioms and men only used five. Women used words such as Rubenesque, plus-size, and full-figured. Men used dark horse, able-bodied and decent build. Both men and women used about the same amount of compound words. Women used ten compound words, such as heavy-set, full-figured, and eye-catching, and men used nine, such as dark horse, able-bodied, and young looks.

Both men and women had a variety of words to describe their attractiveness (Table 4). Women used six words to describe their attractiveness, and men used nine words. For both men and women, attractive was the most popular word. Forty-one women and only eight men used this word. The only other shared word between men and women was cute, which was used by three women and one man.

Most words were used only by men and only by women. For example, women used pretty, beautiful, appealing and eye-catching, whereas men used handsome, good-looking, fairly attractive and attractive. Only one woman admitted to being not-Barbie, but immediately announced she wasn't looking for Ken, either. The words were generally gender neutral, except for pretty and handsome. To call a man pretty, as in "pretty boy," is an insult. Very few women are called handsome. It is a word normally used to describe men. However, calling a woman handsome is not necessarily an insult to a woman, as calling a man pretty is. This relates to Nessa Wolfson's (1989) theory that women can be called bachelors, but to call a man a spinster means he is prissy and unmanly. Schulz (as cited in Wolfson, 1989:175) says that if you call a woman an old man, you have simply made a mistake, but if you call a man an old woman, you have insulted him. This

theory is especially true when looking at all physical descriptive words for women and for men.

When describing their overall physical descriptions, women used thirty-four words and men used twenty-five words (Table 4). Of these words, only seven were shared. These included cute, slender, sexy, attractive, tall, young looking, and height/weight proportionate. However, thirteen of the nineteen (68%) words used by men were gender neutral, and only eleven of the twenty-five (44%) words used by women were gender neutral. This agrees with both Wolfson's and Lakoff's theories that women will use men's language, but not vice versa. For example, the words specifically for men were Robert-Wagner-type, mustache, horse, or full head of hair. The words specifically for women included petite, voluptuous, foxy, shapely, pretty and sugar.

Men's and women's personality descriptions also had similarities and differences (Tables 5 and 6). Women used eighty-seven terms to describe their personalities, and men used seventy-two terms. Again, they both used a similar number of compound words (women used fourteen, men used thirteen). However, men used more idioms than women. Women used fifteen idioms and men used nineteen. There were also fewer gender-related words. Thirty-two words were shared by men and women. Words specifically for women were feminine, gal next door, delightful, and feisty. Men used rough around the edges, and gentleman. Two men and two women referred to themselves as country boy or country girl. Boys and girls sound youthful; the two women were ages thirty-three, and the two men were thirty-seven and forty-three.

It is significant to note that five men referred to themselves as guy, and one woman referred to herself as gal, as in gal next door. The word guy is thought to be a unisex term. A group of men and women is called guys, but these ads show that individually, women are not guys. Not one woman in the personal ads referred to herself as guy. Therefore, guy has an underlying male implication.

Lastly, personality qualities people looked for in the opposite sex were analyzed (Table 7). Women used fifty-six terms to describe desirable personality qualities in men, and men used forty-four terms. Women used twelve idioms, and men used ten idioms. Men used more phrases, such as acts like a lady and excellent personality, while women used one-word terms, such as faithful and athletic. All words were gender neutral, except perhaps the words given by men for women, which were vivacious and feisty. These are normally used to describe women and not men.

After taking four of Lakoff's assumptions about gender-related speech, analyzing personal ads prove or disprove her hypotheses. Personal ads indicated that women do discriminate between hair and eye color more than men, but women do not use 'empty' adjectives such as divine or lovely. It was shown that men actually use 'empty' words more often. The personal ads also showed that lady does have a more frivolous connotation to it than gentleman does. This was observed by looking at the adjectives preceding the words. This agrees with Lakoff's theory. Lakoff also believes that women hedge more than men, but as was seen in the personal ads, not one woman hedged, but men hedged eight times. Next, it was noted that women used more euphemisms with regard to weight than men did; more men gave their weight in pounds than women did. Euphemisms were also used by some people who were African American. In addition, while women tended to use more polysyllabic words than men, both men and women used idioms and compound words almost equally. However, there were some words that appeared to be used only for women than for men. Men's language tended to be more gender-neutral than women's, for reasons that Lakoff believes are such that people want what is more powerful. This is only the first layer of information that can be taken from analyzing personal ads.

Table 1

**Weight****Given by Women**

<u>Height and Pounds (each given once)</u>				<u>Terms (Percentage)</u>	
5'4"	150	5'7"	180	Full-figured	6
5'5"	145	5'2"	167	Ht/Wt Proportionate	4
5'7"	155	5'3"	180	Slender	3
5'7"	160	5'11"	135	Medium build	2
5'7"	170	5'10"	137	Slim	2
5'10"	155	5'1"	120	Rubenesque	1
5'8"	145	5'5"	115	Voluptuous	1
5'8"	135	5'4"	125	Shapely	1
5'6"	110	5'5"	140	Big	1
5'6"	145	5'9"	195	Plus-size	1
5'3"	120	5'3"	145		
5'3"	118	5'7"	145		
5'4"	117				
5'3"	120				

**Given by Men**

<u>Height and Pounds (each given once)</u>				<u>Terms (percentage)</u>	
5'7"	190	5'7"	145	Slender	3
5'9"	165	6'	190	Heavy-set	1
5'9"	185	5'11"	230	Trim	1
5'9"	180	6'4"	195	Thin	1
5'7"	165	5'7"	180	Ht/Wt Proportion	1
5'10"	165	6'	240	Medium build	1
6'1"	154	6'	180	Decent build	1
6'	145	6'2"	195		
5'10"	175	6'2"	210		
5'7"	160	5'9"	265		
5'11"	185	5'9"	160		
5'7"	150	6'	185		
5'7"	170	5'9"	180		
6'	160	6'1"	190		
5'7"	150	6'5"	245		
5'10"	180	5'7"	175		
5'7"	170	6'3"	195		
6'2"	200	6'5"	225		
6'1"	185	5'11"	180		
6'2"	195	5'9"	160		
5'9"	180	5'6"	155		
6'	190	5'7"	145		

Table 2

**Hair/Eye Color**  
(Given in percentage)

**Men**

<u>Hair Color</u>		<u>Eye Color</u>	
Brown	19	Blue	12
Blond	4	Brown	7
Dark brown	1	Hazel	3
		Green	2

**Women**

<u>Hair Color</u>		<u>Eye Color</u>	
Blonde	20	Blue	14
Brown	12	Green	9
Auburn	4	Brown	8
Red	1	Hazel	14
Reddish-Brown	1	Dark	1
Blondish	1	Dark Brown	1

Table 3

**Physical Descriptions**

(Given in percentage)

**Men**

Polysyllabic		Compound		Idioms	
Attractive	8	Good-looking	4	Dark horse	1
Handsome	5	Medium-build	2	Heavy-set	1
Slender	2	Able-bodied	1	Robert Wagner-type	1
Ponytail	1	Average-looking	1	Able-bodied	1
Sexy	1	Decent build	1	Decent build	1
Gorgeous	1	Robert Wagner-type	1		
Mustache	1	Dark horse	1		
		Heavy-set	1		
		Young-looking	1		

**Women**

Polysyllabic		Compound		Idioms	
Attractive	41	Full-figured	6	Full-figured	6
Petite	6	Young-looking	3	Medium build	2
Pretty	6	Medium build	2	Rubenesque	1
Slender	3	Eye-catching	1	Eye-catching	1
Beautiful	2	Irish-looking	1	Shapely	1
Healthy	1	Brown sugar	1	Chocolate	1
Appealing	1	Physically fit	1	Brown sugar	1
Rubenesque	1	Great shape	1	Foxy	1
Voluptuous	1	Plus-size	1	Plus-size	1
Shapely	1	Not-Barbie	1	Not-Barbie	1
Italian	1				
European	1				
Foreign	1				
Chocolate	1				
Glasses	1				
Foxy	1				
Sexy	1				
Exotic	1				

Table 4

**Physical Characteristics Given by Women**

(Percentage)

Attractive	41	Eye-catching	1
Full-Figured	6	Shapely	1
Petite	6	Italian	1
Pretty	6	Irish-looking	1
Tall	5	European	1
Ht/Wt Proportionate	4	Foreign	1
Cute	3	Big	1
Young-looking	3	Exotic	1
Slender	3	Chocolate	1
Beautiful	2	Plus size	1
Medium build	2	Brown sugar	1
Slim	2	Glasses	1
Healthy	1	Physically fit	1
Appealing	1	Foxy	1
Rubenesque	1	Great shape	1
Voluptuous	1	Sexy	1
Eye-catching	1	Not Barbie	1

**Physical Characteristics Given by Men**

(Percentage)

Attractive	8	Cute	1
Handsome	5	Trim	1
Young-looking	4	Ht/Wt Proportionate	1
Fit	4	Gorgeous	1
Good-looking	4	Robert Wagner-type	1
Very fit	3	Dark horse	1
Medium build	2	Mustache	1
Tall	2	Reasonably good-looking	1
Slender	2	Fairly attractive	1
Average-looking	1	Heavy-set	1
Ponytail	1	Full head of hair	1
Decent build	1	Thin	1
Sexy	1		



Table 5

**Descriptions Used by Women to Describe Their Personalities**

(Percentage)

Professional	17	Good mind	1
Humorous/Sense of humor	11	Good heart	1
Honest	9	Adventurous	1
Outgoing	8	Bright	1
Caring	7	Sensitive	1
Intelligent	7	Integrity	1
Hopeless romantic/romantic	6	Kind heart	1
Active	5	Good listener	1
Affectionate	5	Gregarious	1
Down-to-earth	4	Slightly impulsive	1
Classy	4	Family-oriented	1
Fun	4	Warm personality	1
Financially secure	3	Young spirit	1
Independent	3	Sharp	1
Loving	2	Real character	1
Sensuous	2	Daring	1
Casual	2	Delightful	1
Country girl	2	Good morals	1
Easygoing	2	Quiet	1
Happy	2	Degreed	1
Vivacious	2	Stable	1
Energetic	2	Sincere	1
Nice	2	College-educated	1
Degreed professional	2	Picky	1
Attractive inside	1	Ambitious	1
Hardworking	1	Educated	1
Shy	1	Considerate	1
Good-natured	1	Spiritual	1
Enthusiastic	1	Positive	1
Well-educated	1	Spontaneous	1
Feisty	1	Home/business owner	1
Successful	1	Warm	1
Athletic	1	Sweet	1
Frisky	1	Accomplished	1
Lovable	1	Feminine	1
Kind	1	Fun-loving	1
Gal next door	1	Laid-back	1
Heart of gold	1	Unique	1
Emotionally rich	1	Farm girl	1
High performance	1	Low maintenance	1
Talented	1	Charismatic	1
Contemporary	1	Compassionate	1
Congenial	1		

Table 6

**Descriptions Used by Men to Describe Their Personalities**  
(Percentage)

Professional	12	Down-to-earth	2
Incurable/hopeless/romantic	11	Fun	2
Honest	11	Intelligent	2
Caring	11	Psychically fit	1
Affectionate	10	Outdoorsy	1
Easygoing	6	Passionate	1
Active	5	Charming	1
Athletic	5	Artistic	1
Sense of humor/humorous	5	Sensitive	1
Sincere	4	Playful	1
Degreed	3	Degreed professional	1
Nice	3	Friendly	1
Fun-loving	3	Energetic	1
Loving	3	Old-fashioned	1
Funny	3	Bright	1
Open-minded	2	Brave	1
Financially Secure	2	Huggable	1
Compassionate	2	Classy	1
Educated	2	BS+MBA	1
Average	2	Considerate	1
Successful	2	Dedicated	1
Hardworking	2	Desirable	1
Country boy	2	Dependable	1
Gentleman	2	Outgoing	1
Genuine	2	Rough around edges	1
Acts younger	1	Jean-type	1
Emotionally secure	1	Patient	1
Kind	1	Sweet	1
Interesting	1	Trustworthy	1
Business owner	1	Gentle strength	1
Free-spirited	1		
Mature	1		
Shy	1		
Adventurous	1		
Loyal	1		
Sharing	1		
Reliable	1		
Good personality	1		
College graduate	1		
Kindhearted	1		
Laid-back	1		

Table 7

<b><u>Personality Qualities Men Seek in Women (percentage)</u></b>			
Honesty	8	Well-educated	1
Fun-loving	3	Sensitive	1
Romantic	3	Inner-beauty	1
Caring	3	Compassionate	1
Professional	3	Easygoing	1
Secure	3	Active	1
Bright	3	Acts like a lady	1
Good sense of humor	3	Thinks like a man	1
Stable	3	Works like a dog	1
Happy	2	Vivacious	1
Nice	2	Outgoing	1
Classy	2	Passionate	1
Family-oriented	2	Special	1
Sincere	2	Tomboy-type	1
Smart	2	Great character	1
Energetic	1	Independent	1
Sharp-minded	1	Intelligent	1
Friendly	1	Successful	1
Affectionate	1	Confident	1
Lovable	1	Sweet	1
Educated	1	Fun	1
Lovely	1	Excellent personality	1

<b><u>Personality Qualities Women Seek in Men (percentage)</u></b>			
Honest	16	Secure	1
Financially secure/stable	8	Integrity	1
Romantic	7	Kind heart	1
Intelligent	6	Witty	1
Sense of humor	6	Good sense of self	1
Active	6	Happy	1
Affectionate	7	Independent	1
Kind	5	Outdoorsy	1
Fun	5	Classy	1
Easygoing	5	Personable	1
Professional	4	Communicable	1
Sincere	4	Old-fashioned	1
Educated	3	Faithful	1
Fun-loving	3	Talkative	1
Outgoing	3	Pleasant	1
Successful	3	Supportive	1
Loving	3	Nice	1
Caring	2	Commitment-minded	1
Marriage-minded	2	Congenial	1
Sensitive	2	College-degreed	1
Smiley	2	Open-minded	1
Passionate	2	Open	1
Athletic	1	Enthusiastic	1
		Traditional	1
		Spiritual	1
		Energetic	1
		Special	1
		Positive attitude	1
		Guy next door	1
		Confident	1
		Laid-back	1
		Gregarious	1
		College-educated	1

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